

NOTES FROM ELKO - 2/22/74

I. Why Are We Here?

The changes in the 1960s were brought about by two social movements - neither of which were political in origin - civil rights and peace. Politicians have never created the dialogue. They have instead responded to a dialogue shaped by others -- the abolitionists, the Keynesians, etc. Perhaps we can't ask politicians to do what they cannot do. But is there something in politics? Or is it simply a holding action against doom, a horrible ditch? Yet, people are out there in politics right now whose actions will affect us. How far do we have to go to get power? This might be a time curiously when we may be able to get power without selling our soul.

What are the flaws in the political system as it exists now? The evidence against its capacity to solve problems is very strong. We must measure the political process finally by what it produces as well as by its consistency with ideas of popular sovereignty. Measured against these two standards there are a number of flaws.

The traditional checks and balances envisioned by the Framers have broken down. There has been a steady leveling process at the national level by which the Presidency has grown in power and every counter institution has fragmented and disintegrated. The process that caused power to accumulate in the hand of the Presidency was one where concrete problems demanded solutions that only the President seemed capable of providing. But as the liberals turned increasingly to the Presidency, the protections and channels of popular sovereignty were increasingly diminished. Congress is fantastically ineffective. The Cabinet is impotent. All power has drifted to the White House Staff. Perhaps we should dismantle the Presidency -- but how?

The modern political parties are not strong enough to produce any viable restraint on officeholders. The rules changes in the Democratic party have dismantled any discipline the party can expect. By carrying the French system of proportional representation into the Democratic party, we will see a proliferation of interests that will make nomination impossible.

This leaves a central question: Can you administer an industrial state with a fragmented party structure? Where is the vehicle between the people and the government? Unless we quickly create a new infrastructure appropriate to the modern circumstance, popular sovereignty will be dead.

In a different age a powerful mayor or governor had more influence. Party leaders had essential resources at their disposal - jobs, patronage, and food. Party leaders controlled the electoral process at the stage of nomination. Party discipline was enforced in the Congress.

Today all this has changed. The welfare state has assumed most of the functions once performed by parties. Mobility has dried up the local roots of the party. Party identification has precipitously declined.

It is not really accurate to say that our system is unresponsive. It is responsive to the interests of the powerful. It is accountable to the opinions of the few. Those groups with power and money and buildings in Washington do have a voice. The lack of organization of large numbers of people is another flaw. The problem is the bias in the system that gives extensive weight to these groups and almost no weight to the unorganized. The government is a network of substructures. The "public" comes in only in times of crisis. The rest of the time business as usual prevails.

The failure of the free press reinforces all the flaws mentioned so far. The three networks are homogenous. The federal regulatory process limits the opportunity for additional networks and for divergent points of view. We must find out more about the process of television regulation and see that the guarantees of the first amendment are protected by the rules governing television.

The purpose of our political process is not simply to solve problems but to protect the people against government and oppressive power. At times we must sacrifice ideal effectiveness to ensure this protection; we cannot operate a political state on the assumption that only good guys will run the government.

One immediate thing we can do is understand how to protect our citizens against the abuses of the Johnson and Nixon administrations, a decade of misrule. To prevent such abuses of power, we must change the institution of the Presidency. The concentration of power we have witnessed in the last decades is not only constitutionally wrong but ineffective. Those who operate in secret are most likely to make errors.

The system's susceptibility to demagogic movements must be considered. Though right-wing politics may have been set back temporarily by Watergate, the people are frustrated enough to respond to demagoguery. Discontent has been growing. So too anger. If things continue to go wrong, the Hero of Attica could become a natural hero.

How do we prevent this? We cannot depend on accidents (Bremer, Agnew, Watergate); we must design an alternative. We must develop an organization and a public dialogue that can reach out to protect people against their basic insecurities. We must recognize a hierarchy of needs: thirsty people don't want food, hungry people don't want jobs, unemployed people don't want leisure time. Caddell's polls show people's diminishing belief in their own efficacy, a lack of faith in their ability to control government. They feel things are too complicated. Many middle class people with high incomes are despondent. There is a general sense that things are getting worse, not better. And the sense of frustration leads to conspiratorial thinking.

We must wed together a general set of goals for the country with a strategy that can actually take place. Some important thinking is going on; there are social and intellectual thinkers dealing with large problems. The problem is they never end up in the Council of Economic Advisors.

Do we want general statements or specific policy prescriptions? To stop at general level is bullshit, yet we do not want a string of policy papers, a ten-point program. There are dozens of those around and no one is listening.

We must begin by understanding what the problems are, what should be done, what can be done. What are the areas of inquiry? If we determine this, then we can be a seed group to bring in more people. Need knowledgeable people, substantive people. Once we're on the right track we'll plan to meet again in Cincinnati.

To get involved in this, we must all recognize the limits of prophecy. And we've got to be schizophrenic -- knowing with one side of our mind that large, structural change is necessary and almost impossible -- yet believing with the other side of our mind that certain things can and must be done.

II. Statements of What This Group Should Do

Burke: We must begin by understanding what the basic insecurities are that cause people to elect a Nixon. So long as a person feels these insecurities, he will be enormously reluctant to see anyone else's life get better. We must speak to the individual who, in his pride, is trying to make something of his life. That means dealing with guaranteed income and work, with vital issues of life and death (health) and with the education of one's children so they can do better. This society is not looking for a re-distribution of income, but instead for a guaranteed income so its people need not be embarrassed or insecure. We must guarantee these basics as an insurance and recognize this means dealing with economic structure.

Walinsky: We must ask what are the skills of this group and what we can conceivably do. We cannot outline a new world view. But we can do something about inter-relation between master problems and politics in the broadest sense. We should not attempt to rewrite Plato's Republic. We should concentrate on survival issues, serious problems within the scope of societal and human action. Then we should concentrate on how, if possible, to move these into the political process, defining that process far more broadly than simply people running for office. This group does know something about feeding major concerns into the public dialogue, and we do understand the process of mediating between thought and action and should build on that strength.

Wagner: Our pressing problem is not just to develop the "right" answers, but to put together a public discussion of the issues. We must define politics in a way so people will listen. Yet the definition of politics over the last few years has been so narrow that most people see it as irrelevant to their lives. The two most important things that happened in the last 20 years are the questions of sex and race. King certainly didn't start by saying we'll pass the Civil Rights Act, he simply raised the question of race and dignity and things moved on from there. The same with women. We must raise issues like this, and perhaps one is class.

Caddell: The question may not be economics or education, but the fact that the American people have lost faith in America. Americans have always had an optimism about their country and their individual life. Now there is the feeling we've already experienced the best of our time. The future is gone. We can't think here about specific programs unless we deal with the basic question of what our economic and political system is supposed to be doing.

True, people are focusing inward on their own lives but this does not mean lack of concern with broader issues. The decision not to vote used to be uninvolved decision, but today it is a rational decision not to be involved in meaningless activity. If real vehicles are provided, they will get involved. We should recognize the vacuum is so great that certain things can be dealt with now that couldn't be before. Americans have not given up the idea they should do great things.

Thompson: As the ultimate pragmatist, I should like to look at the product. My idea is to select 5 - 10 problems defined correctly so that the answers are self-evident. To understand the problem is to understand the answers. What's happened to the Presidency is one of these first ranking problems. This is so whether you're Nixon or some poor geek waiting for a man on a white horse. The Presidency has become a religious experience. The psychology of looking for a new savior can lead to monarchy or to defacto fascism.

I'm now past the point of my nihilistic memo. If we don't do this, someone else will. If we can't figure it out, how can we expect the electorate to figure it out?

Stearns: There are three ways conversations like this can founder: (1) The political system is like Plato's cave, we can see only shadowy outlines of its underlying structure. We can be frightened by those shadows and by unintended consequences. Or we can and we must bring intelligence to them as best we can. (2) There is an enormous guilt in elite groups like this about our lack of a mass base; we must overcome that guilt and get to work. (3) There is a tendency sometimes to propose solutions as awesome as the problems; e.g., the solution to the problem of concentration of power in government is no government. We must combat this tendency to answer despair with millennia.

Berger: Selecting issues cannot be isolated from what is possible. We must ask what is the capacity for institutional and structural change? What can government do and what are limits of public policy? If we ask questions about the concentration of power, focusing on ways to break up GM or the oil companies, we are asking questions that can't be dealt with. We should restrict ourselves to what is possible.

Goodwin: We must start by outlining the major problems first and then deal with the feasibility. To restrict ourselves to what is possible is to repeat the experience of the last decade where what was possible didn't work. We must deal with fundamental questions: the place of technology; the structure of our economy; the disaster of our educational system; the nature of our community life. Then identify individuals in these areas who can contribute fresh thinking, produce research memos. Requires full time research director to ferret out fresh thinkers, bring in material and pull together coherent statement of problem. Can be done over a period of months. Look toward book with introductory statement and unifying themes. Then decide whether to set up an organizational structure to push it. Enlist various people in different spheres to say this does represent a worthwhile statement. Force it into the public arena.

Wenner: We need a statement and a program that can be brought directly to the people for public debate. So that it can become the set of issues for 1976 and years to come. To restore confidence of people, we must go directly to them. Our language must be simple, basic and profound. It is necessary to reeducate, reappraise and reinterpret the foundation of our government. Could a Constitutional analysis (and perhaps amendments) lead to a restoration of the political process? The people know the Pledge of Allegiance better than

the Declaration of Independence. Yet, our modern dilemma is most similar to 1770 in which the government we seek to rescue was originally born. We were ruled by a corrupt monarch and an incompetent parliament. Taxation without representation rings loud today. There is a need for a popular, newly invigorated and newly defined explanation of the Declaration of Independence, the main matters of the Constitution - the purposes of America.

III. The Major Issues And How They Relate To Each Other

The loss of freedom may be an integrating, thematic structure. We must document the various reasons for this - the concentration of power in private hands and the destruction of counter institutions. We must go back to an understanding of what our foundation is. There is a sense of discontinuity with our past and many people feel this isn't America anymore. We must think of how to make the country again feel America is something to be proud of.

America has reached a maturation point. We have reached an end to the older notion of unlimited resources which has been with us since our founding. We must analyze potential of human freedom in the context of scarcity. Yet, the question of scarcity is unanswerable until we know what our goals are. If our goal is to double autos then the gas shortage may be real. On the other hand, the energy crisis may be an impetus for mass transportation.

Under the heading of freedom, the following issues must be addressed:

The sense of detachment from processes of governance. What is the nature and scope of discontent; why is there a lack of interest? What issues could mobilize the non-voter? Is it possible for people to have a realistic voice? Can we talk in a practical way about power to the people? Can we deal with big government and big bureaucracy?

In an age of administrative government, discussions must focus on how to extend the legislative process into the administrative structure, how to build hearings, and access to, and freedom of, information into bureaucratic decision-making. We must begin with a realistic assessment of the limits of popular participation due to the other values the citizens put first - home, family, job - then move on to try to make the options for participation as wide as possible. Those who are interested should have the opportunity for effective action in the areas they care about.

The right to be left alone must be considered. Questions of concern include credit unions, bugging, surveillance by the FBI. Coercion is a central issue in an administrative state such as ours. Many people may not now perceive the specific elements of coercion in their daily life but they feel a general constriction of freedom that is growing more and more every day.

Race is still the biggest issue in the country. If we don't have some viable approach for dealing with it, there is no chance for anything else. Racial tension surfaces in many ways ... crime, jobs. One alternative may be to present racial issues in class terms. We cannot afford to split the lower middle class and the blacks. We must identify the common enemies that unite these natural allies.

The question of economic stability must be addressed right away.

Can the government control the economy? The Keynesian assumption that inflation can be substantially controlled by government policy is no longer intuitively obvious. We must give people a sense of command over that problem, we must be able to say what can be done to halt the merry-go-round of inflation, to say "here are ten steps to do it."

Then we must move on to consider other questions such as the nature of the work place, alienation, exports, food shortages. How real is the problem of alienation at the work place? Surveys show 92% satisfied with jobs. Is this true? What if we move to a situation of a reduced work week? Marx said the greatest step toward communism is reduction of work week. We should reach out to people who feel trapped by where they're living and working. Must all office buildings be in New York City? If people are going to live outside the central city, then we must put jobs there. What are the ways

to develop a public policy committed to dispersal of business and industry, committed to the family farm.

The regulation of corporate life must be addressed. This means zeroing in on the control of oil and other privately owned public utilities. There is plenty of evidence to support the public sense of a conspiracy by big oil with the help of government to hold back supplies and drive up prices.

Greediness is rooted in institutions not just in individuals. We must take on agribusiness, exposing the big profits big farmers are making in the face of the worst food price inflation, and on the big military. Congress has neither the will nor the capacity to control military spending. Only an aroused public opinion can change this. And it can be aroused if the size of the military budget is linked to inflation and greed, to taxes and unfulfilled social needs.

Wealth and income distribution must be addressed directly. The welfare issue should be folded into a larger discussion of the structure of wealth and taxes in America. So long as welfare remains an isolated issue, it runs into the same problems as the black issue. Need a coalition to unite people and issues across racial lines. One look at income statistics in America suggests that this could be done.

Natural resources, health and education must also be considered in the context of the general theme of freedom.

Foreign policy must also be addressed. To what purposes do we direct our government in foreign involvements? Where does our security lie? How are our goals best realized? Are we self-sufficient and is that even enough? Shall we change and repatriate the resources and wealth of the areas we have exploited and re-exported?

What are the policies of the Soviet Union and what is the Marxist idea and communism today? Most of the adult public have been educated in the theories of the Cold War and still associate the Soviet Union with Stalin. We have begun to hear of Cold War revisionist thinking; and now we have detente. What shall be our relationship to the Soviet Union, China and the Third and non-aligned world?

IV. Notes on How to Begin the Dialogue

We cannot proceed beyond general discussion without a working structure. A book is an instrument that can be created immediately, is adequately malleable as a broader strategy unfolds, and provides the funds with which to begin study and organizing. A book is a method of organization for the traditional products and documents, the calls to action, and an analysis on which effective action must be based. We must get this first step underway as we begin to consider the methods for a much broader dialogue and the ways we can act to implement the discoveries of our inquiry.

We can try to use the book idea as a vehicle for assembling constructive and original thinking on the problems of our country. It should at least be able to do what the Liberal Papers and the Democratic Advisory Committee Papers did in the 1950s.

The question is whether an integrated document can be created and brought to the public attention. Perhaps the bankruptcy is intellectual as well as political. This is what is yet to be determined. We have to decide to whom this book is to be directed: to opinion makers or to general public? Did Liberal Papers influence the framework of the '60 campaign? The theme of getting the country moving again and the focus on economic growth grew out of the circumstances of country at the time. Material allowed JFK to forward his theme with substance. Economic growth knit the issues together. We need to decide if this book is willing to go beyond, to take unpopular stands if necessary. Answer of group is yes. The process of approaching theme must begin by looking at problems. Problems are fundamental. Answers not easy.

People writing for book would have to be aware of the general framework. We would need a strong editorial hand to pose questions to writers and we can start with notion that individual freedoms are under attack or in danger of attack.

Our concern is not whether America is first in world power but whether the original foundation of ideals still exists in changing world. Every chapter should be directed toward this question of freedom. We will recognize that many things done in the name of individual freedom have resulted in isolation; recognize need to adapt freedom discussion to changing economic and social circumstances. Our resource base is constricting. Yet there is still a range of human choice and some solutions and choices are better than others. We have a need for community. We must post these choices and restore sense of possibility to the people.